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SUBJECT: SECRETARY RICE'S DECEMBER 9, 2008 MEETING WITH
LEBANESE MINISTER OF STATE NASSIB LAHOUD

11. (U) Classified by: NEA C. David Welch for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d)

12. (U) Meeting date: December 9, 2008, at 10:30 a.m.
for 30 minutes in Washington, DC.

13. (U) Participants:

UNITED STATES
The Secretary
Deputy A/S David Hale, NEA
Lebanon Desk Officer Christine Lawson

LEBANON
Nassib Lahoud, Minister of State
Ambassador Antoine Chedid, Ambassador of Lebanon to the
United States

SUMMARY

14. (S) The Secretary's December 9 discussions with
Minister of State Nassib Lahoud, a key figure in the
majority March 14 coalition and a staunch critic of
Hizballah, focused on Lebanon's upcoming parliamentary
elections as well as continuing U.S. support for a
sovereign, independent, and democratic Lebanon. Lahoud
predicted a narrow victory for March 14 in the elections
and urged the United States to provide visible support
to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). He also highlighted
the need to demonstrate diplomatic progress on the
territorial dispute with Israel over Ghajar village.
The Secretary affirmed that the United States would
continue to press forward with military assistance to
Lebanon. Both praised President Sleiman's leadership
and noted the need for continued progress in the
National Dialogue. END SUMMARY

LEBANON A SUCCESS STORY, BUT WORK REMAINS

15. (C) Lahoud thanked the Secretary for the United
States' strong support for Lebanon, noting that Lebanon
was now "back on the map." Lahoud highlighted the
emergence of March 14 as a unified political movement
and the exit of Syrian troops from the country. The
Secretary agreed, affirming that the United States would
continue supporting the LAF and its deployment
throughout the country. Although Syria remains
influential in Lebanon, the Secretary noted that Lebanon
finds itself in a much better place today than in 2006,
but cautioned that much work remains. The Secretary
encouraged Lebanon to seize on its good relationship
with Abu Mazen to resolve its Palestinian refugee issue.
Syria also must be held to its obligations, including in
its bilateral relationship with Lebanon.

¶6. (C) Lahoud said that the spring 2009 parliamentary elections would present a close race between March 14 candidates and opposition March 8 electoral contenders, noting that although some districts already were "foregone conclusions," many swing votes remained, especially among Christian voters. Lahoud believed March 14's message of support for a sovereign, independent Lebanon that maintains good relations with the Arab world and with the West was gaining traction with voters. March 14 would present its electoral platform in the next few weeks, according to Lahoud. He added that despite its progress with messaging, additional work was needed to fine tune the group organizationally, given the many strong leaders in the coalition. He also said that internal maneuvering over candidates for particular seats continued.

¶7. (C) Lahoud predicted that despite the opposition's efforts to portray Lebanon's Sunnis as extremists, this message would not resonate with the majority of voters and March 14 would win the elections by a narrow margin, leading to the formation of another national unity government. He said Christian voters were slowly moving into the March 14 camp, skeptically commenting on opposition leader Michel Aoun's "pilgrimage" to Syria. He highlighted that although Aoun maintains a strong base of supporters, his actions are increasingly leading him to lose the middle ground in Lebanon.

HELP WANTED: LEBANESE ARMED FORCES AND GHAJAR

¶8. (C) Lahoud said continued and visible evidence of U.S. support to the Lebanese Armed Forces would be critical in the run-up to elections. The Secretary agreed, reassuring Lahoud that she would continue to push our military assistance package forward, despite Israeli objections. The Secretary said she believed Israel was short-sighted in its opposition to arms for the LAF, adding that a strong Lebanese army was in Israel's own self-interest. She highlighted the LAF's important role as a national institution and applauded its deployment throughout the country, noting that through continued support and training, the LAF could eventually become a more effective force throughout Lebanon, including on the Northern border.

¶9. (S) Turning to Ghajar, Lahoud said discussions "were not going well." He underscored that progress on Ghajar would be essential in strengthening the government and March 14's credibility and urged the U.S. to press Israel on this issue.

¶10. (S) Lahoud asked the Secretary her views on the Syria-Israel negotiations. She remarked that negotiations were not in an advanced stage, but that optimism about the discussions could be helpful. The Secretary added that Syria appears to want to keep its options open, but underscored that Syria would have to take into account the existence of a legitimate, independent, government in Lebanon in its discussions. Ultimately, the Secretary said, the United States would not have a problem with Syria getting its land back through negotiations, but in turn, Syria must accept that it cannot act as a "spoiler" in the region, as it has done for years.

Support for President Sleiman

¶11. (C) Concluding the meeting, the Secretary emphasized the United States' strong support for President Sleiman, noting that he is a serious

interlocutor. Lahoud agreed, highlighting Slieman's strong relationship with Prime Minister Siniora. The Secretary affirmed that in her conversations with the transition team, she would continue to underscore the need to support Lebanon's democratic government, the Lebanese security forces, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and the need for full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 1701 and 1559. She encouraged Lahoud to continue pushing ahead with the National Dialogue process and thanked him for his dedicated leadership.

RICE